

Old Colony: The Friendly Railroad

By the Rev. Canon
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Vestiges are visible throughout the vicinity. Names of streets - "South Station St., Depot St., Railroad Ave. and Old Colony Rd." Remnants of landscape: the hump in the road near the Clipper office (which we hope will be leveled this year with the improvement of Depot St.). This used to be a real "Thank-you Marm" in the days when 2 railroad tracks crossed the highway, for South Duxbury Station situated directly across from the Clipper office boasted a "siding" - i.e. a double track for extra freight or passenger cars. In all probability (although I haven't checked this) you could uncover granite foundation blocks for the wood viaduct that bridged the stream on the way to Island Creek. What ever happened to those sturdy oak beams that stood so firmly for so many years?

Actually there weren't that many years. One of the qualifiers of the transportation syndrome of the mid-nineteenth century was the reliance Duxbury placed on travel by water. The Clipper Ship era was at its height when railroading was getting under way, and Duxburyites felt it would be unpatriotic to support this new untried mode of travel through Duxbury. After all there was a stage coach that made regular runs to Kingston, and there had been scheduled train runs from Boston to Plymouth since 1845. Why should Duxbury abandon their ships, the greatest industry of the town since its early beginnings? Trains had begun regular runs to Cohasset and Hingham as early as 1846. It was not until 1878 when the hand-writing was clearly on the wall for sea travel that Duxbury allowed the railroad to be laid. There must have been some really feisty town meetings before this epochal event could take place.

And once the die was cast it made all the difference in the world to the people up and down the South Shore. By the turn of the century and very shortly thereafter the "New Haven Road" had become the great employer and benefactor of the town of Duxbury.

A new generation of commuters was born, and Boston moved to within an hour's travel time instead of a day as before. Workers on the "section" multiplied, freight agents and conductors and "train men" and locomotive engineers and firemen inaugurated a new breed of entrepreneurs and the town prospered.

It is hard for me writing a generation after its demise to exaggerate the enormous human enterprise the railroad was in its prime. Today when I look at the houses that sit across the right of way - and walk along the landfill which is the extension of Old Colony Road, I wonder that it has all gone. Gone, except for some happy memories among the people of Duxbury. In its heyday at the turn of the century, according to Dorothy Wentworth, the Standish Hotel advertised "Twelve Trains a Day" as an enticement for its summer patrons. My own recollection is that as summer tourism stabilized in the twenties, there were at least 6: the early commuter special at 6:30, another at 7:30 both of which became express trains from Hingham and reached Boston in an hour. The 8:30 train took an hour and a half as it stopped at every town along the way. At 4 and 5:30 trains began leaving Boston for the return trip, having sat in the marshalling yards at South Station all day. And as these trains arrived at their several stations there was a great deal of excitement, not only greeting of friends and

husband commuters but often relatives and there was always the anxiously awaited mail and special parcel post freight. Horses and carriages (and later autos) lined the station platform and stood patiently waiting the warning whistle that sounded from Green Harbor. Occasionally in the old days a spirited horse would rear and protest as the foreign monster spewing fire and smoke from its nostrils came toward them, but on the whole they were fairly well controlled. One memorable exception was the time my brother Henry and I had an unforgettable experience.

It happened one evening at dusk. We were returning from Irving Peterson's dairy farm in Green Harbor with our young horse "Ginger" pulling a small carriage with four forty quart milk cans in back. "Ginger" had been

raised as a trotting horse and trained for racing. But he wasn't quite fast enough so Father bought him at a hefty discount and loved to show him off by pulling fast past his friends on the roadway few of whom would think of harnessing a "trotter" to an average carriage.

So as we came down the hill toward the railroad crossing and station at Millbrook we heard the warning whistle of the 5:30 commuter as it left Green Harbor. The question now was whether to whirl "Ginger" around and retreat to the safety of Ford's pasture till danger was past or to push things through at high speed. Since "Ginger" was wearing blinders we decided on the latter course, but we did not reckon with his intelligence. The bolting

across the tracks went well, but as we started up the hill beyond "Ginger" looked around, saw the locomotive belching its fire and smoke and took one gigantic leap, dumping the carriage seat, my brother and me and the four forty quart milk cans into the street and disappeared around the bend of St. George St.. Half an hour later we found him calmly waiting for our return in the horse barn, with my father standing by uttering a few home truths for our future use. People who were brought up with spirited horses did find life exciting at times.

The "Old Colony Railroad" became a vital part of our lives in those times and even took on the nature of a family. We grew to know the conductors, the "trainmen", the mail clerks and even the engineers, and often by their first names. That is why I have entitled this reminiscence "Old Colony, the Friendly Railroad." It was because it was so much a part of the town and its people that the New Haven officers met so much resistance when they

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Section 2

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announced that as of a certain date in 1939 it would be abandoned. So strong was the protest that a public hearing was held in the meeting hall above South Station. Sixty-five people drove up from Duxbury to see if there were not some way service could be continued. But the Duxburyites made one mistake as the New Haven representative was soon to clarify. He called the meeting to order and asked how many people present had taken a train - any train, to come to the meeting. Not a single hand went up. The

officer said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I rest my case." And the dismemberment of the Old Colony Railroad began.

Some of us with the wisdom of hindsight regret the dismemberment of our railroads, and the substitution of transportation by means of the private automobile with enormous invasions of the public treasury to build and maintain and police our highways. From the point of view of cost alone there is just no comparison between these two methods of moving people. Perhaps accompanying the massive use of automobiles we can give some thought to a return to public rail transportation as we enjoyed it under the benefit of the "Old Colony," which was more than a means of transportation, it was human and friendly.

One experience of this friendliness I'll never forget. Harry Blackmun, now Justice Blackmun of the US Supreme Court, and then my roommate at Harvard was coming to have Thanksgiving dinner with my family in Duxbury. For some reason I never did figure out we had a bridge game going in the dorm and lost complete track of time till a friend down the hall shouted out, "If you're going to catch the 5:30 train to Duxbury you two fellows better move it". We leaped up from the table with the clock standing at 5:15. Ran to the Subway, a train was waiting at the platform, raced up the South Station escalator two steps at a time and reached track 23 (Duxbury trains always left from track 23) just as the dispatcher was shutting the gate. Of course there was no time to stop to purchase a ticket. I saw the tail end of the train fifty yards or so down the track and shouted: "That's our train. What will we do?" and the dispatcher

replied "If that's your train, you'd better run for it."

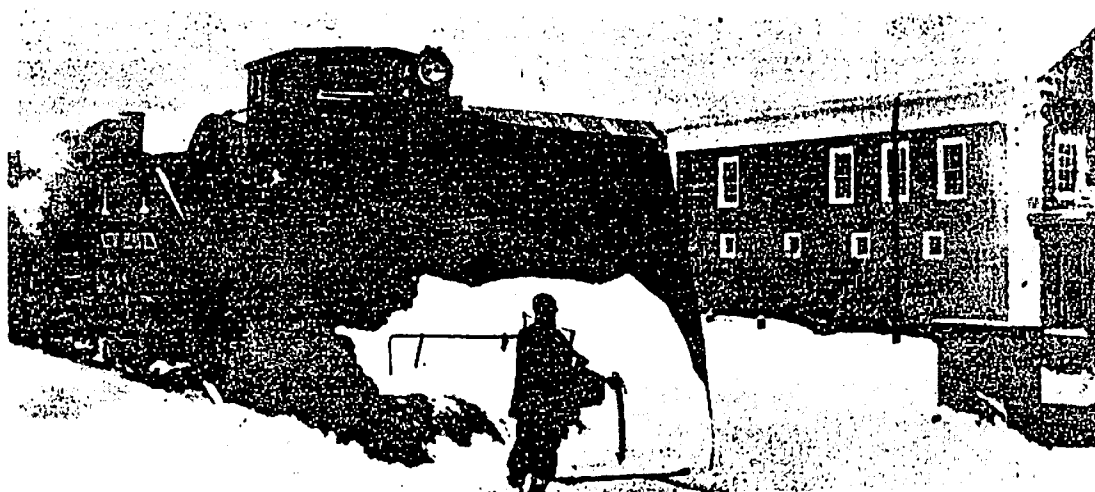
And so we did, bag in hand, down the long concrete platform as fast as we could go. I knew that the train went slowly out of the station and through the marshalling yards so there was at least an even chance that we'd make it. In a few moments the conductor and trainmen came onto the rear train platform and shouted encouragement. We were gaining and soon we threw our suitcases into the hands of the platform cheerers, and really ran. By the time we had covered another

hundred yards we had made it and as we sank into our seats the conductor finessed the extra charge of 10 cents for a passenger who boards the train without a ticket. He said we had earned that exemption by such a good run.

I know of no other community on the South Shore that has immortalized the Old Colony Railroad by so many street signs. I believe that the people of the town have a real feeling of gratitude for those glorious days between the Clipper ship and the automobile when we had a kind and gentle way of travelling to Boston.



So. Duxbury station on So. Station St. just across from the Clipper office.



Old Colony train with snowplow approaches Kingston depot.